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*The indispensable Importance of real
Religion.*

A
S E R M O N

Preached at

Shakespear's-Walk

March 31, 1766.

For the Benefit of the CHARITY-SCHOOL
in that place.

By SAMUEL STENNETT, D.D.

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LUKE x. 42.

—*One thing is needful*—:

THAT Religion is a concern of infinite importance to mankind, every one will acknowledge who admits that there really is such a thing. And yet alas! there are few only who have a deep, operative, abiding sense of this impressed upon their hearts. To excite therefore your attention to this one grand concern, and thereby persuade you to a ready concurrence in every measure, that may tend to spread the knowledge and influence of religion among others, is the object of the present discourse. Nor can, methinks, any one among us turn a deaf ear to this argument, while he reflects, that it is not only the most interesting that was ever proposed to his attention, but that it

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stands

stands thus distinguished in our text, by the decisive sentence of the Son of God himself.

WHAT led our Saviour to discourse on this subject, is particularly mentioned in the preceding verses. Entering it seems into a certain village, he was invited to the house of a woman named *Martha*, who had a sister called *Mary*. This village it is highly probable was *Bethany*, a place not far from *Jerusalem*; and these two women, the same of whom the Evangelist *John* speaks^a, and whose brother *Lazarus* had been raised from the dead. They appear both of them to have been the friends of *Jesus* and of religion: though in the course of the story the preference in regard of piety, is manifestly given to *Mary* above *Martha*. As to *Mary*, she sat at the feet of *Jesus*, and heard his word^b. Her attention was almost wholly taken up with the things of God; so that she gladly embraced every opportunity of hearing our Saviour's doctrine, and profiting by his instructions. But as to *Martha*, she was cumbered about much serving^c. Indeed her much serving was the effect of her hospitality, and an expression of her love to Christ, and was therefore in these views of it highly commendable.

^a John xi.

^b v. 39.

^c v. 40.

mendable. But her active and impetuous temper had hurried her into too great anxiety about worldly things, and so was likely to prove hurtful to her best interests. Yea one ill effect of it remarkably appeared in the indecent fretfulness she betrayed on the present occasion. For in the midst of her busy care to provide for our Saviour's entertainment, observing her sister wholly taken up with his company and conversation, she petulantly complains of her inattention to the affairs of the family, and prays that she might be dismissed to assist her therein. To which our Lord immediately makes answer in the verse preceding the text ; “ *Martha, Martha,* “ *thou art careful and troubled about many* “ *things.* The anxiety you express upon “ this occasion is unbecoming and sinful. “ How fond soever you may be of shewing “ me respect, yet there is a mixture of vanity with your hospitality, and of worldly-mindedness with your care and industry. “ You are too busy about these matters. The “ affairs of your family, though they ought “ to be prudently attended to, yet should not “ shut out the grand concern of God and religion. This is *the one thing needful.* Be “ persuaded therefore to transfer your need-

“ less anxieties from these many trifling mat-
 “ ters to that which is of indispensable im-
 “ portance. There is a necessity of one thing^d.
 “ And instead of censuring your sister *Mary*
 “ as if she were too religious, rather consider
 “ her conduct as a proper pattern for your
 “ imitation; for she *hath chosen that good*
 “ *part, which shall not be taken away from*
 “ *her.*”

AND now, methinks, little pains need be taken to prove, that this reproof of our Saviour's is of more general use than in the particular instance before us, and that he himself so designed it. Dismissing therefore any further concern with *Martha*, let us consider this most important and salutary admonition as addressed immediately to ourselves. There is a strong propensity in each of us to an undue solicitude about the affairs of the present life. But what says Christ to us amidst all our vain pursuits?—“ Be not care-
 “ ful and troubled about these many things.
 “ There is need of one thing only: let that
 “ therefore be the main object of your at-
 “ tention.” And if it be ask'd what this one thing is: the answer is ready, it is Religion, or a principle of divine life implanted in

^d Ἐνός δὲ ἐστὶ χρεία.

in the heart by the grace of God; the main expressions of which are faith in Christ, and repentance towards God. By the Prophets it is usually stiled *the fear of the Lord*,^e and *a new heart*;^f and by the Apostles, *the new creature*,^g *the incorruptible seed*,^h and *the wisdom that is from above*.ⁱ It includes in it an interest in the mediation of Christ and all the blessings of salvation, as its privilege; and the right government of the temper and life, as its duty. My present design is not to enter into a particular explanation of the nature, but to confine myself entirely to the importance of it. It is of all things most necessary, and that without which we cannot fail of being exposed to the utmost misery and danger. In order therefore to set this argument in the strongest light, we shall,

I. COMPARE the one thing needful with the many other things of the present life, about which we are apt to be careful and troubled;

II. SHEW more directly wherein the importance of it consists; and then

III. CONFIRM this view of it by some plain reflections on the nature of Religion, as it hath been already in general explained.

I. IF

^e Jer. xxxii. 40. &c. ^f Ezek. xviii. 31. ^g 2 Cor. v. 17. Gal. vi 15. ^h 1 Joh. iii. 9. ⁱ 1 Pet. i. 23. ¹ Jam. iii. 17.

I. IF we compare serious religion with the most important and interesting concerns of human life, it will clearly appear to have the precedence of them all. Knowledge, reputation, friendship, subsistence, and health will, it is imagined, include in them every thing which mankind hath been us'd to account needful.

I. *KNOWLEDGE* we will mention first, as it is what men in general deem the least necessary, though it be an excellent accomplishment, and in some respects superior to any of the blessings just mentioned. An acquaintance with human nature, with the history of the world, with the various interests of mankind, and with the connections and dependencies of all things around us, is a very desirable attainment. Nor is the utility of it inconsiderable, since it not only affords a rational pleasure to the mind, but is of great importance to direct our conduct in most of the affairs of life. So that we are highly indebted to those who, at the expence of much time, and unwearied labor, have generously contributed to the interests of learning and knowledge. But notwithstanding this, human science, whatever be the benefits resulting from it, cannot be stiled the one thing needful;

needful ; no not absolutely so, even in regard of our well-being in the present life. A man may be wholly rude and uncultivated as to any accomplishment of this sort, and yet be both a good and a happy man, an useful member of society, and a joyful expectant of future felicity and glory. Not a few instances of this sort we have frequently before our eyes. Nay it is possible, and it too often happens, that persons of distinguished abilities and of extraordinary attainments in respect of these things, may be destitute not only of the grace of God, but of a common principle of honesty ; and so be rather the enemies than the friends of mankind, the pests rather than the ornaments of society, and instruments of the greatest evil, rather than of any good to their fellow creatures. Human knowledge therefore, however useful, is not so necessary but it may be dispens'd with, especially when laid in the ballance with the grand concerns of Religion. Whatever rational pleasure it may afford the mind, it will not give peace to the conscience: however it may direct our conduct in the civil affairs of life, it will not guide our feet to heaven: and though it may secure us from many temporary evils and inconveniencies, it will not effectually give us
the

the conquest over ourselves, and make us meet for a better world.

2. *REPUTATION* is a desirable blessing; and when considered in reference to probity and virtue, is certainly of far greater importance to our happiness, even in the present life, than the most considerable improvements in human science. It is natural for men to wish to please. A generous mind feels a satisfaction in being approved by the wise and good. But this passion, carried beyond its due bounds, hurries men into an immoderate and sinful pursuit of honor and applause; and that oft-times upon the footing not of real but of supposed merit. To be elevated above the common level of mankind, and to be deemed great, prudent and honorable by the men of the world, this too many account their chief happiness, and eagerly grasp at, as the one thing needful. But alas! how sad the deception! what vain shadows! what empty bubbles are all the honors of this transitory world! They will not satisfy an immortal mind; nor will they always add ease and security to our outward circumstances. So far from it, that they frequently prove the occasions of many anxious cares and restless disappointments. Yea even the just respect
and

and esteem of his fellow creatures is not essentially necessary to a man's real felicity; nor will it certainly secure him from the many other evils of human life, to which he stands exposed in common with the rest of mankind. And however a good name, or a character for sobriety and integrity, is better than precious ointment, and far more fragrant to a virtuous mind than the sweetest perfumes to the senses; yet it is not the one thing needful. This invaluable blessing a man may fully possess, and yet on many accounts be extremely unhappy: and though on the other hand it be invidiously and cruelly denied him, yet he may enjoy the most agreeable peace and composure within. But if neither *knowledge* nor *reputation* come within this description; may it not be applied,

3. To *Friendship*? I had almost said, Yes. For so inestimable is the blessing, that it is hardly possible to exceed in the commendation of it. It is one of the chief felicities of the present life. We were made for society. We could not live without it. The happiness of Heaven consists in the perfection of it. Friendship is a firm barrier against many of the evils and dangers of life; a reviving cordial to the heart amidst most of the sorrows

and afflictions of it; and that fruit of heavenly growth, which adds a rich flavor to all our other enjoyments. The advantages of counsel and reproof, of assistance and sympathy which arise out of it, cannot fail of endearing it to every thoughtful and prudent mind. He therefore who hath a wise, affectionate, and faithful friend, may be justly deemed the favorite of providence: and though he ranks with the lowest class of mankind; yet (so rarely is true friendship to be found!) he stands distinguished in point of happiness, above many who shine in all the pomp and splendor of human greatness. But after all, this is not the one thing needful—not so needful as to be of the highest moment. Our friends, however dear to us, may deceive or forsake us, or by death be forced from our embraces. Some amidst a swarm of friends have been miserable. Yea it is often beyond the power of friendship to succour and relieve us in outward extremity; and much more so to speak peace and joy effectually to our hearts, when bowed down with religious grief and melancholy. Whereas, on the other hand, there have been those who, though deprived of all agreeable connections on earth, yet, have enjoyed the most peaceful

peaceful security, and the most enlivening pleasures, under the shadow of his wings who is friendship itself. This blessing then, excellent and desirable as it is, is not the one thing needful. However,

4. Most are agreed in thus representing a man's *subsistence*, maintainance or livelihood. Hence food and raiment are usually stiled the necessaries of life. And such they certainly are : we cannot live, we cannot subsist without them. A thousand other things might be dispensed with, as superfluities, or to say the best of them, the agreeable accommodations of the present state. But these are strictly speaking needful: and our Saviour himself admits that they are so, when, discoursing to his disciples of these matters, he tells them, *Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of them.*^k A care therefore to provide a comfortable support for ourselves and our families, is not only allowable, but our incumbent duty. Yea so far is religion from countenancing sloth, under the pretext of indifference about worldly affairs, that it assures us, the man of this character *bath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.*^l Nevertheless the importance of these things is only comparative, and they

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take

^k Mat. vi. 32.^l 1 Tim. v. 8.

take their denomination as needful, merely from their reference to our existence in the present world. They are necessary, as animal life cannot ordinarily be maintained and upheld without them: But they are not necessary to the existence and well-being of our souls, or to our future and everlasting felicity. We may be poor, destitute and miserable, in regard of our outward circumstances, and yet possess the best riches. Our bodies may be cloathed in rags, and yet our souls arrayed in heavenly attire. Our natures may faint and die away for want of common sustenance, and yet our immortal spirits be fed with living bread. *Lazarus* was denied not only the dainties of the rich man's table, but the crumbs that fell from it; yet *Lazarus* possessed the one thing needful. And the same may be said,

5. AND lastly, as to *Health*. This every one will acknowledge an important blessing—so important, that no other enjoyment of life can be properly relished without it. What are all the profits, honors and pleasures of the world, to a man languishing of a mortal disease, worn out by racking pains, or pining away with loathing sickness? He is absolutely incapacitated for the pursuits of life, and
totally

totally indisposed to them. Wisdom and knowledge, reputation and friendship avail him little; yea food itself, the most needful thing in life, however elegantly served up, is nauseous to his taste. Health therefore cannot but claim the preference to every other outward good. Yet even this is not the one thing needful, in the sense of our text. The health of the soul is of infinitely greater moment than that of the body. This must die, but that must live for ever. And how sad to see the one arrayed in all the bloom and verdure of youth, exulting in the possession of ease, vigor and strength, while the other is deformed, enervated and ruined by sin, growing up to death and destruction, and ripening for everlasting vengeance and misery! And, on the other hand, how pleasing to congratulate the Christian, as the Apostle *John* did *Gaius*^m, on the health and prosperity of his soul; while his outward frame, amidst the increasing languors of age or sickness, is making speedy advances towards its final dissolution!

Thus neither *knowledge*, nor *reputation*, nor *friendship*, nor *subsistence*, nor *health*, however excellent, useful or important in themselves, are of like moment with the
great

great and inestimable blessing of real religion. This demands the precedence of them all, and is, in the estimation of wisdom itself, the one thing needful. From this comparative view of it let us then proceed,

II. To inquire more directly wherein the importance of it doth consist.

Now that surely will be deemed most important, which enters into the essence of our happiness, which takes in the whole compass of our interests both natural and spiritual, which hath respect both to body and soul, and which extends its influence through time into eternity. And such is the nature of religion.—O that men did but believe it! O that by the grace of God they were persuaded to make trial of it! Here then we might take a view of the many advantages which attend the experience and practice of religion in the present life, and in that which is to come.—As to the present life; we might shew how admirably it is adapted to promote the real interests of persons of every age, in every relation, and in every condition.—We might discourse of its utility to the young, to check the violence of their passions, to restrain their inordinate desires, to regulate their aims and pursuits, to fortify them against the snares of
life,

life, to animate them to the duties of it, to infuse a sweetness into the enjoyments of it, and to add a real beauty to their character and deportment in the view of all.—We might represent the importance of it to persons of riper years, to qualify them for the various services to which providence calls them, to direct them in emergencies of the most critical and trying nature, to hold them steady to their best interests in seasons of eminent temptation and danger, and to render them both respectable and useful in their day and generation.—And hence we might go on to a description of the many blessings it pours upon the hoary head; what cheerfulness it spreads over the countenance, when the vigor and sprightliness of youth abates; what firm support it yields the heart, when the animal spirits are almost dissolved and broken by the infirmities of nature; and what weight it adds to the instructions and counsels then given, when the capacity and judgment of former years are in other respects greatly on the decline.—We might farther enlarge on the importance of it to persons in every relation of life, to magistrates and to subjects, to masters and to servants, to parents and to children, to brethren, to friends, and to neigh-

neighbors: how needful to teach men their duty, to animate them to it, and to assist them in it.—We might likewise represent the advantages resulting from it to persons in every condition: in prosperity, when the world smiles upon them, and they have an affluence of all outward good; to secure their hearts from an immoderate fondness for present enjoyments, to inspire their breasts with thankfulness, and to dispose them to usefulness: and in adversity, when providence frowns on them, and they are encompassed on every side with perplexity, sorrow and trouble, to reconcile them to the will of God, to alleviate their affliction, and to render it subservient to their real advantage.—Hence we might proceed to shew how needful true religion is in a time of sickness and death, when all the scenes of life are passing away from before our eyes, when the king of terrors is nearly approaching, and when eternity with all its awful realities is immediately in our view; how needful it is then to banish fear from our hearts, to reconcile us to that most certain event, and to diffuse serenity and joy through our minds, when nature itself is dissolving and dying away.—And here we might, to finish the scene, re-

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present the never-fading honors, and immortal pleasures of the heavenly world; the large and fair inheritance there provided for the sons of God, the crowns of glory that shall be placed on their heads, the palms of victory that shall be put into their hands, the robes of joy and gladness they shall wear, and the rest, the happiness, and renown they shall possess to all eternity.—Animating and inviting however as these subjects are, I shall not in this place any farther enlarge upon them.

My design is now rather to evince the importance of vital religion, from a contemplation of the misery and danger to which the want of it necessarily exposes us. And if it can be made appear, that without it we lie open to the greatest evils in life, to the utmost anguish in death, and to the wrath of God in the world to come; it will, it must be acknowledged, that it is the one thing needful. Here then we will,

I. TAKE a survey of the unhappy condition of a man void of religion in the present life. To this end let us view him on the one hand triumphing in prosperity, and on the other laden with adversity: events these that are alike common both to the good and the bad. And since it is from them we usually take our measures of human happiness

or misery, a consideration of his behavior, in both these circumstances, will give us the most striking idea of the necessity and importance of true religion.

LET *Prosperity* then, first of all, be the dress we view him in. His worldly schemes succeed to his wishes. He grows great, rich, and honorable. He has large treasures, wide extended possessions, numerous friends and dependants, and an affluence of all outward good. His wealth entitles him not to power and dignity only, but to all the delights and gratifications of sense. He flourisheth *like a green bay-tree, his eyes stand out with fatness, and he hath more than heart can wish.** And now will you say that this man is happy, that his wealth secures him from danger, and that, being thus exalted to the pinnacle of honor and pleasure, he is beyond the reach of misery? O no! being at enmity with God and religion, his blessings become curses to him; his prosperity makes him only a broader mark for temptation, and so in the end capable of the greater misery. Turn your eye from all this glare of external pomp and gaiety to his heart, and you will find him rather an object of pity than of envy. There reign the sinful passions of human nature invested with

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* Psal. xxxvii. 35 — lxxiii 7.

sovereign power, and confirmed therein by every accession of worldly good. He is full, and takes the name of God in vain. He hath every thing, and yet truly enjoys nothing. He abounds, and yet is not content. To his lusts he yields, and yet his lusts are not satisfied. His riches make him poor, because they only increase his desires. His pleasures cease to be pleasures, through satiety and want of variety. The passions of pride, jealousy, discontent and desire are all irritated and inflamed by his successes. New temptations lead him captive into new sins. Guilt accumulates on his conscience. His dislike of every thing that is serious increases. He would fain persuade himself to be an infidel. The evil day he puts afar off. God he hates—the world he loves—death he fears—and his own soul he destroys for ever. Is not then the condition of this man, amidst all his boasted enjoyments, very deplorable? Possessing more than the necessities of life, even its joys and pleasures, he is miserable. And why? Because he has not the one thing needful, lives without God in the world, and is a slave to sin and sense. If this be the case, and let experience and observation decide the point, of what infinite importance is religion!

How needful this one thing to enable us to enjoy life, and to prevent our being ruined by it! to moderate our affections to the world, and so, secure us from falling a sacrifice to it! to keep us in the day of temptation, and to make us more than conquerors, when all the powers of earth and hell threaten our destruction!

HAVING thus beheld the man of this world arrayed in all the gaiety and splendor of outward prosperity, let us now reverse the scene, and view him plunged in the depths of sorrow and *adversity*: For adversity is sometimes the lot of bad as well as good men. We will suppose him then stript of the profits, honors and pleasures of life, entangled with the difficulties and disappointments of it, reduced to poverty and want, laden with disgrace and contempt, languishing of the pains and weaknesses of declining nature, and, to complete the scene, treated with coldness and neglect by his best friends, and utterly forsaken and abandoned by the rest. To all these calamities, or at least to one or other of them, we will I say suppose him subjected. Now in these circumstances, how does he behave?—how does he support himself?—what considerations is he possessed of to calm his mind, and fortify his heart?

'Tis

'Tis possible indeed that firmness of animal spirits, or ambition to be thought superior to the misfortunes of life, may in some degree suppress or stifle the feelings of nature, and enable him to assume an appearance somewhat brave and steady. But being destitute of any just sense of religion, how is it possible he should enjoy that real, inward serenity, and that rational, uniform patience and resolution, which the faith of God, of providence, and a better world inspires? on the contrary, the fear of God being far removed from his eyes, and the hope of the gospel having no firm hold on his heart, we shall rather hear him affronting God with the most indecent reflections on his dispensations, or else just expiring under the insupportable weight of his sorrows. And in these sad circumstances, how much is the man of this world to be pitied! He has no God to fly to—no providence to confide in—no Saviour to pity him—no divine aids to assist and strengthen him—no promise of better blessings to secure him from despondency—nor the least hope of future happiness and glory to soothe his tempestuous passions, or to administer joy and gladness to his heart. Most men seem to think religion needful at such a time. And indeed if there were no truth in it, yet the firm persuasion of it would be extremely eligible,

eligible, when in these circumstances, as it so much tends to quiet the troubled breast, and to reconcile it to events that are necessary and unavoidable. A man overwhelmed with outward trouble, and in the midst of this thick and dark tempest without one ray of hope as to a future state, must of all men be most miserable. Such the Apostles acknowledge *they* should have been, had they remain'd strangers to the animating prospects of a better world which Christianity affords.

RELIGION then is most certainly the one thing needful, as the want of it exposes men to the greatest danger in a time of *prosperity*, and adds infinitely to their distress in that of *adversity*. And from this view of things, we may easily judge how it must be with such persons in every condition, circumstance, and relation of life. Their hearts not being principled with the grace of God, they can have nothing to preserve the ballance in their minds; but must on every occasion be subject to a hurtful if not painful fluctuation of the passions: They can have nothing to ward off the many dangers continually flying around them; but must lie at the mercy of every resolute temptation that assaults them. But allowing the man of this world every perquisite

quisite of happiness, that can be supposed to fall to his share, or indeed that the delights and pleasures of sense can possibly afford; yet,

2. HE must die; and being at enmity with religion, how deplorable must his condition be in that critical, that trying hour! It is dreadful indeed to describe to you the countenance, the expressions, the feelings of a dying sinner. Many I am sensible there are, who pass out of life in a hardened and thoughtless manner: but the reverse is perhaps most commonly the case. And where the mind is capable of reflection and prospect, and especially where the conscience is thoroughly awake, how pungent must be the distress, how bitter the agony of the soul! Some of us, it may be, have stood by the bed of a departing sinner, have the dreadful image still before our eyes, and the sad accents still sounding in our ears. "Every earthly scene
" is passing away, the bonds of nature are
" just dissolving, and as to this world, to
" which I have sacrificed my heart, my
" hopes, my all, I am no more. With you,
" my friends, my possessions, my honors,
" my sensual gratifications, yea every thing
" that is dear to me, I must now part—part
" with

“ with you, never—never to enjoy you any
 “ more! And what have I before me?—all
 “ is dark and gloomy. I dare not hope for
 “ heaven, for I am yet in my sins. Or if
 “ I could suppose it were possible I might
 “ possess it, yet I cannot wish for it. ’Tis a
 “ holy place, and so perverse is this heart of
 “ mine, that though I leave what is mortal
 “ behind me, I cannot think of being happy
 “ there. O sad! as I am, thus incapable of
 “ happiness! Nay my conscience tells me I
 “ am justly doomed to misery—an alien from
 “ God—an enemy to him,—a rebel against
 “ him! his mercies I have abused—his warn-
 “ ings I have slighted—his grace I have
 “ affronted and despised: and now, I am
 “ undone—undone for ever.” What dis-
 tracting, what horrible language this! *The*
spirit of a man may bear his infirmities, but
*a wounded spirit who can bear?*¹ *It is a fear-*
ful thing to fall into the hands of the living
God.^m *Who knoweth the power of his*
*anger? even as is his fear, so is his wrath.*ⁿ
 How lamentable a sight this!—a soul perish-
 ing in its sins! See! the pale countenance,
 the cold sweat, the faltering lips! Nature
 dissolves—every surrounding object, va-
 nishes—and the eyes swim in death. The

¹ Prov. xviii. 14.

^m Heb. x. 31.

ⁿ Psal. xc. 11.

curtain of humanity falls, and upon the naked helpless soul eternity at once pours all its tremendous realities. Say then, is not religion, in these moments at least, the one thing needful? Surely it is. But if you still doubt, ask those, who, having death and eternity immediately in their view, are best capable of resolving this interesting question; and they will acknowledge, I had almost said to a man, its vast importance. But the importance of it is chiefly to be estimated, by the reference it hath to a future state. Which leads me now,

3. To describe to you, or at least to attempt a description of, the great loss, which he sustains who dies a stranger to God and religion, and the infinite miseries which are the lot of the impenitent and ungodly. Scripture assures us, that *except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God:*^m and that *the wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment.*ⁿ Now by these declarations it clearly appears,

1. THAT he who passes out of life in an unrenewed state, is for ever excluded the heavenly world. A consideration this which,
E methinks,

^m Joh. iii. 3.

ⁿ Mat. xxv. 46.

methinks, upon the most general view of it, reflects an amazing importance on religion. But how does the importance of it magnify in proportion to the clearness and brightness of our views of that blissful state! and yet, since our most exalted ideas of it are inadequate and imperfect, the greatness of the loss cannot be fully ascertained in the present life. Let us however for a moment attempt to follow him, who was *caught up into paradise*, and there *heard and saw things that are unutterable*,^o—to follow him thither, in our meditations, that we may there learn how needful this one thing is, without which we can never have admission to that world, or if we could, could never enjoy it. “ Tell
 “ us then, O ye happy spirits, who are al-
 “ ready in possession of heaven, what are
 “ your natures, what your capacities, what
 “ your pleasures, and what your employ-
 “ ments. In heaven, that immeasurable space
 “ of light, perfection and glory, ye dwell.
 “ Your immortal spirits, refined from all the
 “ dross of ignorance, sin and sense, are ex-
 “ alted to the utmost pitch of vigor, purity
 “ and joy. With myriads of perfect beings,
 “ all

“ all formed for friendship and love, you for
 “ ever associate. The divine *Jesus*, who the
 “ other day yielded his life unto death for
 “ your sakes, deigns himself, and in your
 “ own nature, to dwell among you, to con-
 “ verse with you, and to lay open his heart
 “ to your view. Yea the blessed God, array-
 “ ed in all the charms of infinite love, as
 “ well as in all the splendor of ineffable
 “ glory, condescends to reveal himself to you,
 “ and to shed on you the richest blessings of
 “ his bounty and goodness. O! the pure,
 “ the substantial, the growing pleasures you
 “ enjoy while you behold his face in righte-
 “ ousness, and feel yourselves transformed
 “ into his perfect likeness! while you con-
 “ template his excellencies, sing his praises,
 “ and never cease to do his will! Yours is
 “ the distinguished honor to *be kings and*
 “ *priests unto God,*^p to sit with *Jesus* in his
 “ throne, and to minister to him in his
 “ temple above. Yours is the exalted pri-
 “ vilege to possess *an inheritance* that is *in-*
 “ *corruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not*
 “ *away,*^q and a *far more exceeding and eter-*
 “ *nal weight of glory.*^r And yours is the
 “ refined bliss to feed on heavenly joys, and
 “ to drink of rivers of pleasure, which run at

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“ the

^p Rev. i. 6.

^q 1 Pet. i. 4.

^r 2 Cor. iv. 17.

"the right-hand of God for evermore." But I forbear.—How vain the attempt to describe the glories of that world! Our sight is too weak to sustain a vision so bright and splendid. Till therefore we arrive at heaven, we must be content with little more than being assured, that *eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor heart conceived what it is.*^p Yet by this distant and confused view of it, we clearly discern that the loss, whoever suffers it, must be immense, since there are no human measures by which we can fully take account of it. Of what infinite moment then is this one thing needful! But this is not all, its importance is still farther heighten'd and increas'd by a view,

2. OF the misery to be endured, as well as the loss sustained by the impenitent and ungodly. *These shall go away*, says he who shall be judge on that great occasion, *into everlasting punishment*^q. And what is that punishment? Adequate conceptions of it we cannot frame, any more than of the happiness we have been contemplating. Yet scripture presents us with such a scene as may justly make the heart of a sinner tremble, and convince

^p 1 Cor. ii. 9.

^q Mat. xxiv. 46.

convince him that there is the most indispensable necessity in religion. If to be deprived of all the boasted acquisitions and enjoyments of the present life; if to be abandoned to the rage of fierce and ungovernable passions, without feeling even the little transient pleasure that results from the gratification of them; if to endure the acute and unremitting pains of a conscience pierced and torn asunder with guilt and fear; if to be cast out of the presence of God in the character of a friend, and yet to have him ever before the eye as a justly incensed and irreconcilable enemy; if to bear the weight of his indignation without any support under it, or any mitigation of it; and if, in one word, amidst all to have no hope of deliverance; if this be misery, such scripture assures us is the portion appointed the wicked. *To them that obey not the truth, but obey unrighteousness, even to every soul of man that doeth evil, he will render indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish^r. And they that know not God, and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power^s. It is an unpleasant, and*

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^r Rom. ii. 6, 8, 9.^s 2 Thes. i. 8, 9.

I am sensible an unthankful office to lead you, sinner, down into the regions of the damned, and to shew you the mansions where dwell spirits of the like impure, fierce and diabolical passions with yourself; but the sad, the tremendous necessity of which the text speaks, obliges me. The compassionate *Jesus* himself, who came on the kind and generous design of saving both soul and body, hath bid you *fear him, who can destroy the one and the other in hell.*^{*} And while he hath directed the views of his faithful disciples to the fair and pleasant fields of paradise above, describing them in all their beauty, verdure, and glory; he hath set before *your eyes* a scene, which though figurative is expressive of real and intense misery, even *the pit that hath no bottom*[†]—*the worm that never dieth*[‡]—*outer darkness*[§]—and *fire unquenchable*^{||}. O! who can tell what are the terrors of the second death? or describe what is meant by the *power of his anger*[¶], who is a *consuming fire*[‡], and by *the wrath*, not of the Lion only, but of the abused and provoked *Lamb*[‡]? Enough however we know of it, even from

* Mat. x. 28.

† Mat. viii. 12.

‡ Heb. xii. 29.

† Rev. ix. 1, &c.

‡ Mark ix. 44.

§ Rev. vi. 16.

|| Mark ix. 44.

¶ Ps. xc. 11.

from this general representation, to put an infinite importance into the one grand concern recommended in our text.

And now, after what hath been said, need any thing farther be added to confirm the argument before us?—One should suppose not. And yet,

III. THERE are some collateral proofs or illustrations of the infinite importance of religion, which, though we have only time just to mention them, must not be omitted. God is the great object and author of religion. The soul is the grand and only seat of its residence. And to an eternal world it extends its influence and effects. The dignity and perfection therefore of the blessed God, the value and excellency of the human soul, and the tremendous solemnity of a long and unchangeable eternity, all reflect an inconceivable importance on the great concerns of religion, and set them infinitely beyond a competition with the most momentous event of a temporal kind. But what tends to fix upon the mind such a reverence for the one thing needful, as is never, never to be obliterated, is, that it owes its existence, with all the comforts and powers of it in this life, and all the joys and triumphs of it in another, to the
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humiliation and death of the Son of God: Behold the supreme Majesty of heaven *tabernacled among men*^b, him *in whom dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily*^c, and *who thought it no robbery to be equal with God; humbling himself and becoming obedient to death, even the death of the cross*^d: and all this with a view, to repair the injuries which sin had offered to the divine government, to make way for the return of the blessed Spirit to the temple he had forsaken, and so, again to possess it of this heavenly blessing of which I have been discoursing. Behold, I say, this unfathomable condescension of divine goodness on the one hand; and the stupendous expressions of majesty and glory attending it, in the resurrection and ascension of *Jesus*, on the other; and then say whether there is not an importance in the one thing needful which infinitely exceeds, not only all human measures, but those by which the most exalted seraph, about the throne of God, is used to compute. In short, when we have said that religion exists and lives through the death of the Son of God, we have said the utmost that can be imagined by a finite mind to reflect an importance and solemnity, as well as a beauty and

^b John i. 1, 14.^c Col. ii. 9.^d Philip. ii. 6, 8.

and glory on this great concern. But we forbear to enlarge here, leaving each one amidst this scene of wonders to his own contemplations.

The subject however of the necessity of religion must not be dismissed without a word or two by way of improvement.

I. How astonishing is the infatuation of mankind in general, that they concern themselves so little about an affair of so interesting a nature ! The fact is too true to be disputed. Look where we will we see men, with the greatest eagerness, pursuing their worldly advantage. Either the riches, the honors, or the pleasures of the present life are with them the one thing needful. So they consider these temporary and unsatisfying enjoyments, amidst all the plain evidence they daily have before their eyes of their wretched mistake ; and amidst even the convincing proof, that sometimes strikes their consciences, of the truth and importance of religion. But how sad a reflection this on all their boasted wisdom and prudence ! It hath ever been a maxim, admitted even by those who have the slenderest pretences to wisdom, that what is of the greatest moment should be first and chiefly attended to. But how egregiously, do these men of wisdom contradict the very

maxim by which, they would be thought to govern their conduct. Religion, which is confessedly the most important concern, is treated with the utmost indifference and neglect. How justly then does such a behavior merit the description of madness and folly, which the bible every where gives it! And how affecting a proof doth this furnish of the degeneracy of human nature! Can it be doubted then, that sin hath drawn a veil of darkness over the minds of men, and that it hath brought a disease of the most fatal tendency upon their hearts? 'Tis impossible, methinks, for any one to sit down and seriously consider this mournful fact, without acknowledging that the whole world is apostatized from God, and sunk into guilt and misery. Convinced, however, as the Christian is, of the reality and importance of religion, it would argue a strange kind of insensibility in *him*, were he not,

2. WITH earnestness and affection, to exhort men to a serious attention to it. So *Jesus* and his apostles did, so we are commanded to do, and while we do it, have the dictates of sound wisdom on our side, as sufficiently appears from what has been already said. Supposing it then, sinners, only *possible*, that the things you have heard *may* be

true ; how can you acquit yourselves of the charge of imprudence and folly, to the last degree, while you resolutely turn a deaf ear to these remonstrances ? What is this better than laying violent hands on your own souls, and wilfully plunging yourselves in death and destruction ? *He that sinneth against me, says wisdom, wrongeth his own soul ; and all they that hate me, love death*^d. O ! may you be persuaded then, to listen to the voice of wisdom ! Compare the dictates of scripture with those of your own consciences. Set the interests of this world in the ballance with those of another. Reflect on the miserable state you are in, while at enmity with God and religion.—Retire into your closets—converse with your own hearts—and pray God, if peradventure, your folly and disobedience may be forgiven you. So would we most heartily commend you to his rich and boundless mercy, through Jesus Christ, and to the mighty influence of his grace and spirit. Again,

3. WHAT abundant cause have you for joy and thankfulness, who are interested in the one thing needful, and have with *Mary chosen the better part which shall not be taken away from you* !^e In proportion to the impor-

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^d Prov. viii. 36.^e Luke x. 42.

tance of this great concern, so should be the cheerfulness of your spirits, and the gratitude of your hearts. Give God the praise: for from him it is you derive this inestimable blessing. And since you possess that which is most necessary and desirable, and with which is connected the promise of every needful good thing; be not careful and troubled about the many trifling affairs and enjoyments of the present life. Refer your temporal interests to the direction of a wise and good providence: and having intrusted your immortal spirits to the care of the Lord *Jesus Christ*, be assured he will *keep what you have thus committed to him, against the great day.*^e Once more,

4. AND lastly, If we are ourselves sensible of the importance of religion, and are really possessed of it; it should doubtless be our diligent concern and ardent prayer, that others may become partakers with us of this divine blessing. The absolute necessity as well as infinite excellence of it, we should therefore represent to them in the strongest terms; and enforce such representations by our own example. Nor should our regards be confined to those only with whom we are connected,
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^e 2 Tim. i. 12.

by the bands of natural relation or civil friendship; but be extended to all around us, as far as ever our influence can possibly reach. And if youth and poverty are circumstances that peculiarly entitle persons to our sympathy and assistance, in regard of the things of this life; they ought to have still greater weight in matters of infinitely greater moment. To relieve the distressed, and provide for the destitute, are offices highly pleasing to a man of a humane and compassionate heart. But how must that pleasure be heightened and improved in the breast of every real Christian, whilst he is at once contributing towards furnishing his poor fellow-creatures with the needful things of this life, and with the means of leading them into the knowledge and possession of that one needful thing, which relates to another! The gratification of this divine passion, is the motive I would use to persuade you, to a liberal contribution to the very useful and important design, I am now to lay before you—I mean that of the CHARITY-SCHOOL in *Shakespeare's-Walk*.

“ THIS School was founded towards the
 “ latter end of Queen *Ann's* reign, in the year
 “ 1713, when the Liberties of the Protestant-
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“ dissenters were publickly struck at, and they
 “ were generally under sad apprehensions of
 “ being soon wholly deprived of them. At
 “ that time did God stir up the hearts of a
 “ number of pious persons to found this cha-
 “ rity-school; trusting in him for protection,
 “ and deliverance from the danger that threa-
 “ tened them; which he was graciously plea-
 “ sed to afford the very next year, by the ac-
 “ cession of King *George* the I. to the throne.
 “ This school consists of thirty poor boys,
 “ who are instructed, cloathed annually, and
 “ put out apprentice at the expence of the
 “ society. They are carefully taught by a
 “ proper master, to read, to write and cast
 “ accompts, as far as is necessary to qualify
 “ them for the lower trades, to which they
 “ are generally put. They are also instruct-
 “ ed in the Assembly’s Catechism; and are
 “ obliged to a regular attendance on the
 “ public worship of God, at the stated sea-
 “ sons and at the evening lecture in this
 “ place. In order to guard them more
 “ effectually against Popery, there is a set
 “ of *Fox’s* Martyrology, belonging to the
 “ school, which the boys read publickly, in
 “ their turns. The managets, who are cho-
 “ sen annually from among the subscribers,
 “ take

“ take the best care they can, to provide so-
 “ ber and godly masters for the boys, when
 “ they are of age to go apprentice; and mo-
 “ ney is given with each boy, or laid out by
 “ the managers in cloathing him suitably to
 “ the trade he is going to. The friends of
 “ this charity have had the pleasure to see
 “ the good effects of it, on many educated by
 “ it, who at this time fill up their stations in
 “ the world, and in the Churches of Christ,
 “ with reputation, and honor to religion.
 “ This school was the first essay of its kind
 “ among protestant-dissenters in *London*, in
 “ which the children are taught and cloath-
 “ ed. The example has since been follow-
 “ ed in several parts of the town, by erect-
 “ ing other schools on the same plan.
 “ Wherefore it is hoped, that as it led the
 “ way to these pious designs, this considera-
 “ tion will entitle it to some peculiar regard,
 “ from those who have a real concern for
 “ sobriety and virtue, for pure and undefiled
 “ religion, for the protestant interest, for
 “ the rising generation, and the welfare of
 “ mankind.

AND now need I take up any more of your
 time, to perswade you to pay a suitable regard
 to this very laudable and useful design?—I
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think I need not—No more therefore shall I add, but just direct your eyes to the very expressive countenances of the helpless children before you (whose future behaviour will I hope abundantly reward your liberality) and then, intreat you to reflect on that sense, I trust, you now feel of the indispensable importance of real religion.

The E N D.

N. B. *The managers meet at the school-house every first Wednesday in the month, at five o'clock in the evening, where they will thankfully receive contributions to this charity; or upon notice given to Mr. William Hubbard, in Wapping, near Wapping Dock, the present treasurer of the School; any person will be waited upon, who is willing to encourage this good Work.*